

1<sup>st</sup> May 2020



**Chief Executive**

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Good afternoon

Before moving on to discuss this week's note, we would first like to update you on the ongoing situation in West Berkshire.

Our **Community Support Hub** (CSH) continues to operate well and we are beginning to look at how this might be woven into our business as usual activities. Although requests for help have plateaued, it is likely that the CSH will need to remain in some form for the foreseeable future in order to help vulnerable residents who may still need to self-isolate.

We remain confident that we have enough **PPE** stock to meet the district's needs as we have received a delivery of equipment. We will continue to do all we can to sustain availability for those who need it. The Government are rapidly increasing **testing** capacity across the country. We are therefore working alongside our partners to enable key workers, over 65s and anyone who is unable to work from home to access testing within 72 hours of experiencing symptoms. This includes the testing of household members of key workers who are symptomatic.

We have now received an additional £4.3m from Government to support our response to Covid-19. This is likely to be used in the main to support our social care services, where demand will increase as a result of the current situation, and for other services where income has decreased. We are reviewing our budgetary situation regularly and can again reassure you that we remain in a position to continue to deliver the services residents need at this time.

We continue to work hard to distribute government grants to eligible local **businesses** and we are pleased that this is going well. We have been made aware that the eligibility criteria for these grants has meant that some local companies remain in need of support. We were grateful to see, following input from local authorities and businesses, that the previously announced Coronavirus Business Interruption Loans (CBILS) were made more accessible but we have also this week made further representations to Government on how the criteria for grants might be amended to meet the needs of West Berkshire's economy.

As you all adapt to a new way of life, we too are looking to work differently to maintain services for residents. As part of this, we had our first virtual **public meetings** in the past week and we are pleased to say that these have been well-received. Many of the changes we have brought into place, including those made to our IT arrangements to enable officers more effectively to work at home, will have an impact long after the current situation has passed and we look forward to delivering our corporate priorities and engaging with residents in a more agile way in the future as a result.

For this week's update, we want to focus on our community. We have long said that our strong, resilient communities are a huge part of what makes West Berkshire a great place to live and work. In recent months, and as part of the work we have been undertaking on our Council Strategy, we have been putting a lot of thought into how we can engage more closely with our communities and support our parish and town councils to deliver services to residents.

This week, both of us have spent time in our Community Support Hub and with volunteers who are serving their communities. We have seen examples of the different ways that each town, parish and group is coordinating this and tailoring it to the specific needs of the individuals they are helping. From groups operating remotely via WhatsApp and Zoom to town halls to newly repurposed living rooms in the homes of volunteers, every area has quickly developed a model that works for them.

You may be interested to know that we have launched a new webpage to celebrate the work being done by groups and individuals. It may seem that there is precious little good news at the moment so we hope to grow this into a lasting record of the strong community response we have seen locally. You can view this and find out how to submit content for the page here:

[www.westberks.gov.uk/localheroes](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/localheroes)

Late last year we invited local government colleagues from other parts of the country into West Berkshire to help us review our performance as a local authority. Among other things, these colleagues looked at how we were communicating with our residents and businesses and they identified a need to further enhance this engagement to build a stronger sense of place and belonging in the district. The current situation has seen this come into its own, with voluntary groups and town and parish councils from across the district coming together unprompted and working alongside us as we respond to this public health emergency.

The groups that have grown and emerged as part of our Covid-19 response have made our local networks stronger and this will have a lasting impact. We have been so proud to see this work happening spontaneously and feel that it is a strong foundation on which to build for the future. As with much of what is likely to happen in the immediate future, we cannot be sure what form this work will take but we can say that maintaining these newly establishment links will remain at the forefront of our recovery work.

Just as you all are, we are unsure as to when life will return to normal and if, indeed, it ever will in light of the lasting impact of the virus on all of us. As we mentioned last week, we have started to work on a recovery plan for our district. This plan will be vital as we support residents and businesses to adapt to changes to our way of life and to rebuild what may have been lost. In order for this to be effective, we must ensure that everyone has the opportunity to become involved, whether through enhanced engagement and consultation or through directly participating in the delivery of the plan. We will share more about how we intend to do this in the coming weeks and months but for now we would like to say this is something we look forward to working on with our communities.

As always, we finish this week's update by wishing you and your families well. Please stay healthy and stay at home for it is this that will help to protect you, your community and your public services.

Yours sincerely,



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